



---

## 12 .Open Space

---

Whether the venue for a rough and tumble soccer game or a small, quiet green space that marks the passage of the seasons, open spaces play a vital role in the lives of Cambridge residents. When well sited and well cared for, open spaces enhance the activities that surround them and help diffuse the conflicts and tensions that dense living may entail.

### **Assumption**

*> Cambridge's dense development pattern limits the opportunities for creation of new open space. The existing inventory of facilities is the city's greatest open space asset.*

The fifty acre Danahy Park is an extraordinary addition to the Cambridge parks system, but it is clearly an anomaly. Although the park was well planned to take advantage of a rare opportunity to reuse derelict land, the circumstance under which the land became available is not likely to be repeated, at least not at the scale of this multi-functional facility .

By most professional measurement standards Cambridge is severely deficient in the neighborhood oriented recreational and open space resources deemed desirable in any community .The city's eastern neighborhoods in particular, suffer such a deficiency. The very density that makes housing choices so difficult, that exacerbates residential and commercial parking issues and that aggravates the process for locating any public facility, makes it extraordinarily difficult to add even modest elements to the city's park system.

Cherry Street in Neighborhood Four is a classic example of the hard choices that Cambridge's historic density forces on public policy. The City purchased the 18,000 square foot site, along with several others, to construct a planned complex of neighborhood oriented recreation facilities in an area clearly in need of such amenities. The other parcels were transformed into parks as planned, but the Cherry Street site was ultimately used to construct eight units of, also badly needed, affordable housing. Each new increment of parkland will come with increasing difficulty as it must overcome the dual problems of limited opportunities and severe competition from alternate, equally desirable public uses. The city's present open space inventory will continue to be its principal recreational asset for the foreseeable future.

#### **Assumption**

*> Opportunities for significant additions to the open space inventory lie principally in those nonresidential areas where large coordinated redevelopment projects are likely to occur.*

*> Open space should be a major component of new development, both residential and nonresidential.*

The acquisition of new open space facilities is of course not completely foreclosed. As indicated earlier with regard to the new housing construction Cambridge's industrial areas offer the greatest opportunity for securing important new facilities. Such areas tend to be in transition, accommodating in new physical forms the demands of an evolving economy; the districts and the lots within them are large enough that significant open space is a physical possibility; and such areas can and have been rezoned to incorporate incentives and mandates to provide open space within the new large scale developments which have typified such areas in the recent past.



*The City's transformation of a forgotten remnant of water into Lechmere Canal Park was an essential first step in the revitalization of the Riverfront.*

The East Cambridge Riverfront project, where thirteen acres of public open space was created from land once devoted to private parking and marginal uses, has employed the full range of mandates, incentives and public acquisition mechanisms to create a valuable open space system. That system both enhances the private development while providing recreational opportunities for all Cambridge residents. University Park, also rising in a long-neglected industrial district, will likewise create an elaborate system of publicly accessible open space which will serve its own residents and the adjacent Cambridgeport neighborhood.

Given Cambridge's relative paucity of open space and recreational resources, it is important that each new addition to the city's residential and commercial buildings inventory contributes, to the extent physically possible, to the enhancement of the city's open space resources. Each new building, whether residential or commercial, places additional demand on the city's open space resources; that additional demand should ideally be met in part by open space provided in conjunction with the new construction. The larger and more comprehensive the development scheme, the greater the opportunity to meet that goal. However, the modest contributions small development can make should not be ignored. In Harvard Square for example much semi-public open space has been created in conjunction with private construction that has materially enhanced the public enjoyment of that commercial district.

### Assumption

*> Programming and reuse of facilities will play a major role in extracting the most use and benefit out of the present and future limited additions to the city's open space inventory.*

*> Open space facilities settling a wide range of functions and clientele should be encouraged.*

An increase in the quantity of open space in Cambridge will always be costly to achieve and, given the many competing demands for the limited land resources within the city's six square miles, may not be possible in many neighborhoods at any price. Therefore, the efficient and effective use of the city's existing available resources is of paramount importance. Growing demand and rising expectations for the services that open space facilities provide to Cambridge residents will have to be met increasingly without expansion of the supply. Responsiveness to changing demands and demographics, commitment to quality materials and maintenance, and innovation in programming, design and use options will be requisite in a constrained environment where the ideal will be difficult to attain.



It is also important to recognize the value of a wide range of open space facilities to the city's residents. Open space and its important role in the city is not and should not be defined as recreational facilities exclusively, or necessarily publicly owned, or in some cases even publicly accessible. There are many publicly used, privately maintained, valuable and necessary open space features which benefit all Cambridge residents in very diverse ways. These include such fine examples as the pedestrian walkway between Brattle Street and Mt. Auburn Street in Harvard Square, the private courtyard at Charles Square, the visible but inaccessible green courtyards at residential buildings throughout the city or at the Harvard houses, and the publicly-owned but simple, landscaped space at Arrow Street and Massachusetts Avenue.

## Assumption

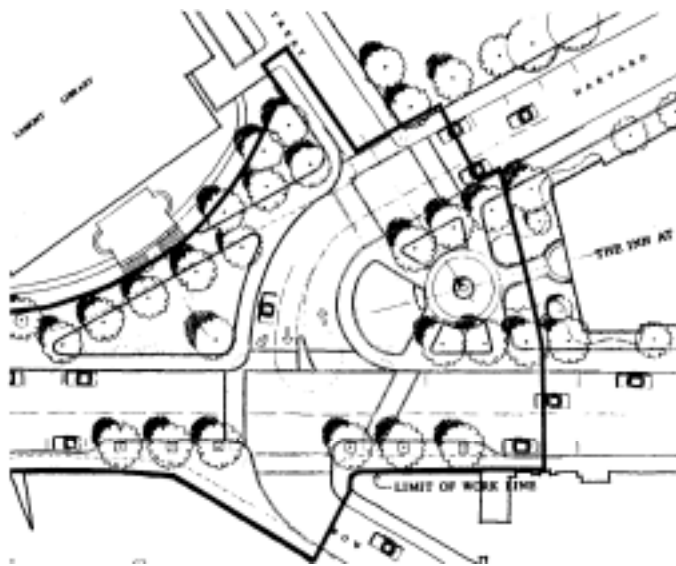
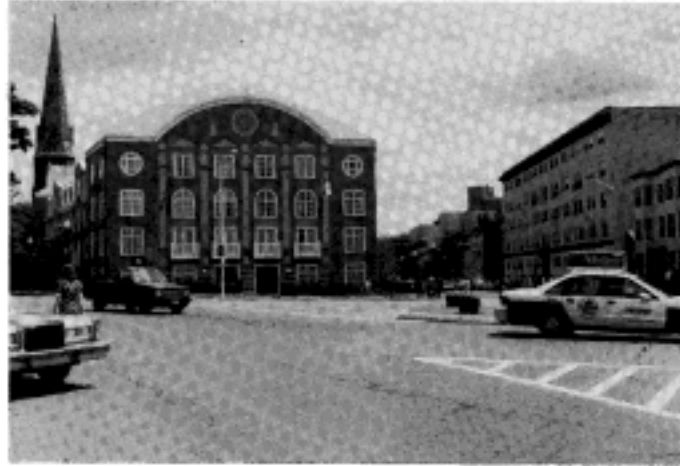
*> Long-term maintenance of the existing inventory of parks and playgrounds is likely to prove a limiting factor in the city's ability to expand its open space resources.*

It would appear at times that the creation of a new park or open space is easy, while more difficult is the day to day effort to maintain it as a useful, attractive amenity in the face of heavy demand and the deterioration that even respectful treatment entails. As in programming and use, innovation in this regard is essential to maintaining the usefulness of the city's existing facilities, never mind those additions which are desired and necessary. The wise first step, however, is a costly one: investment in good, proven design and quality, durable materials. Two hundred thousand dollars and more to renovate a small play space or \$30,000 to install an 800 square foot landscaped park may seem excessive at first blush. It can be expected, however, that dividends will be received in the years ahead when the deteriorated and dangerous equipment or the crumbling asphalt curb of a cut rate installation does not have to be replaced or constantly patched. Such initial investment may slow down limit the acquisition of new facilities but it assures that those we have are providing the most benefit possible over the longest period of time.

Innovations in actual maintenance tasks are another necessity. Already the city has begun to experiment with the impressive but very costly facilities installed as part of the boom construction years of the 1980s. Abutters to Lechmere Canal Park, for instance, make proportional contributions to the park's maintenance and have formed an organization to oversee the private contractor who does the actual work. In Kendall Square, Boston Properties is responsible for the repair and maintenance of the public improvements in the redevelopment area. At the initiative of the Program on Public Space Partnerships at Harvard's Kennedy School, a trustee group, formed of City, private business, neighborhood and institutional representatives, raised money for the redesign of Winthrop Square Park and now contributes to and oversees its maintenance. Similar innovative initiatives will be required in the future in many other locations in Cambridge.



*At present, Quincy Square is only a wide expanse of asphalt. After a sewer separation project is completed, the City will create an attractive space for pedestrians, while defining safer roadways for automotive traffic.*



---

## Open Space Policies

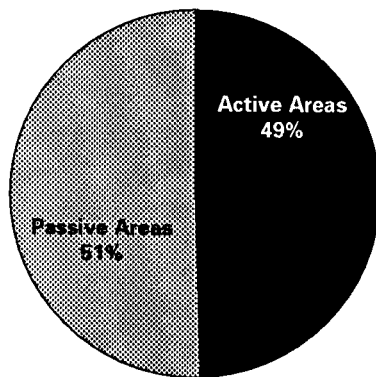
*The open space policies are intended to provide the basis for maintaining and improving the city's existing inventory of natural areas and outdoor recreation facilities, as well as to prepare for the creation of new parks and open space where appropriate.*

### Use of Open Space Facilities

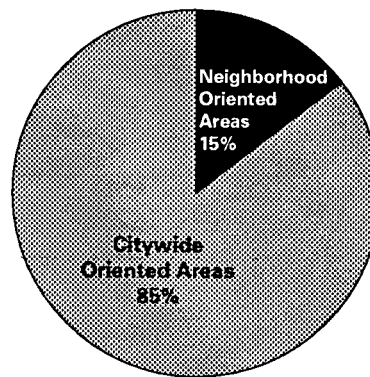
Cambridge is likely always to have a deficiency of all kinds of open space facilities, just by the nature of its past development patterns and the difficulty of acquiring any new facilities for cost and space reasons. Of central importance then is how the city makes use of those facilities it does have and who, among its citizens, can be served by those open spaces. While the city's open space inventory is quite varied and flexible in the kinds of activities it can support, real use limits arise when any individual facility is analyzed and when the distribution of facilities is taken into account.

The character, and consequently the uses, of open space vary widely within the city. Frequently, when the term is used, "Open Space" means publicly-held or controlled property whose dedicated or intended use is for recreational activities or as a landscaped amenity: the Cambridge Common, Danehy Park, the local tot lot, or the MDC's Alewife Brook Reservation are among the many possible examples. It is expected that such land will remain in public use or control and will not be built on or disposed of for private development or other public uses (like schools). When the issue of adequacy of standards arises it is this kind of open space that planners have in mind, and in this document this type of open space is the kind usually referenced.

Outdoor recreation areas by type



Outdoor recreation areas by users





#### **POLICY 63**

Open space and recreational facilities serving a wide range of functions and clientele, including the elderly and special needs populations, should be encouraged, either through expansion of the existing inventory, through multiple use of existing facilities, or through creative programming of those facilities.

#### **POLICY 64**

Conservation lands and other environmentally sensitive areas are a vital part of the city's open space system and should be maintained and protected appropriately. Public access to and use of these areas must be carefully planned and balanced with preservation of these resources.

#### **POLICY 65**

Expansion of Cambridge residents' opportunities to use regional recreational facilities (those owned by the Metropolitan District Commission and the Commonwealth) located in the city should be encouraged, particularly where the adjacent residential community is underserved by local recreational facilities, and when the legitimate regional use of that facility would not be unduly restricted. In addition, there should be increased coordination of recreation programming and planning between the local and regional levels.

The range in the character of this open space suggests opportunities to provide a variety of recreational uses and activities as recommended in Policy 63. Though all of these uses are not necessarily compatible on any single site, all are generally considered desirable or necessary and should be accommodated within the open space system. The new Danahy Park is a large facility with many active uses but its location at the edge of the city, with limited nonauto access, assures that only a limited number of people can make convenient use of the facilities on a regular or daily basis. Smaller facilities located throughout the city, such as Sennott and Riverside Press parks, provide fewer recreational uses but are easily accessible to abutting neighborhoods.

Determining the appropriate mix of uses for a site requires careful evaluation of community needs, the site's special features and characteristics, the functions it can and does serve and the public benefit it contributes to the open space system. While a large facility in size, the MDC's Alewife Reservation is an important urban wild area which significantly limits its use for active recreation. Similarly, the Fresh Pond Reservation is a unique natural resource, providing the city a public water supply and high quality open space and recreational opportunities. Policy 64 suggests that the City must balance carefully the need to protect environmental resources with the need to accommodate recreational use throughout the open space system.

The multi-use MDC park along the Charles River is large, widely distributed, and accessible to a number of city neighborhoods. Its uses are limited in part by physical space or by its intended character (as for instance as a wild area or visual amenity). But in the case of the active facilities at Magazine Beach, the limitations are programmatic, because the facilities are, legitimately, designed to serve a regional clientele. Policy 65 suggests that more direct service to Cambridge residents requires a change in the way the facilities are managed and coordinated with local programming specifically.

## New Open Space in Development Areas

In contrast to the severe constraints the city's existing dense neighborhood development pattern imposes on the expansion of open space facilities, the evolving industrial areas, in Alewife, East Cambridge, and Cambridgeport, provide an opportunity for significant additions to the city's open space inventory. This is because these districts, and frequently their individual constituent lots, are large by city standards, the use of the land is in flux, subject to change and frequently to total redevelopment, and it is possible to permit significant flexibility with regard to the character of the future private development. Policy 66 recommends that new open space facilities should be considered where these circumstances occur. The city's challenge is to secure such open space without disruption of the private redevelopment of these areas and with as little financial commitment as possible.

The city has actually had a significant track record in this regard over the past decade. Charles Park in East Cambridge is on land donated by three adjacent commercial and residential developments and financed exclusively by monies provided to the City by those developments. The park is, and will remain, publicly owned.

In Cambridgeport's University Park redevelopment, a multi-acre open space will be created which will be accessible to all city residents for various low-intensity recreational activities. The park, which is required by the zoning affecting the site, will remain in private ownership but is required to be accessible to the general public for at least seventy-five years.

A second site in Cambridgeport will be transferred to City ownership for a park, to be built and programmed by the City to meet the recreational needs of the abutting neighborhood. A zoning mechanism recently adopted by the City Council provides the means by which the site's development potential can be transferred by the owner, in this case MIT, to other sites, thus making the land available to the City at no cost.

### POLICY 66

New open space facilities, including larger ones for organized activities, should be considered for those private developments where the size of the development, the amount of land area and/or the ownership patterns provide the flexibility to accommodate such a facility without loss of economic value for other uses.



*The creation of Charles Park was established as an important goal in the 1978 East Cambridge Riverfront Plan. The land for this park had belonged to Lotus and the developers of the Cambridge-Side Galleria and the River Court housing project. Through agreements with the City, the land and money for design and construction of the park were secured. The park opened in 1992.*

## Acquisition of New Open Space

The desirability of additional open space facilities for Cambridge residents is rarely disputed. However, the issue which immediately comes to the fore, is the cost the city is willing and able to pay to increase its open space inventory. This cost comes both in monetary terms and in lost opportunities to use the land for alternate, equally important uses like affordable housing or residential parking.

Federal and state acquisition programs, when they are well funded, may ease the financial burden of open space acquisition. They do not ease the conflict between competing uses, but on occasion creative use of a site may make multiple uses possible.

Further, the constraints that density imposes on the city's attempts to secure new open space may be eased somewhat by exploring creative solutions to the shortage. The city's street and sidewalk rights-of-way, of which there is ample supply, may on some occasions and in certain circumstances provide open space options. An example is when a street is redesigned to make open space use possible simultaneously with use by vehicles: the "woonerf" concept common in European residential neighborhoods or when a street is closed on a regular basis to permit exclusive pedestrian use, as is done with Memorial Drive in the summertime.

Nevertheless, it is anticipated that any new additions of open space in critically deficient neighborhoods will be difficult to achieve and a rare occurrence.

### **POLICY 67**

**Acquisition of publicly owned or administered open space should be made in those dense residential areas clearly deficient in all forms of open space, but only where significant fiscal resources are provided through federal or state acquisition programs or a substantial portion of the cost is borne privately; facilities of modest size and flexible in use characteristics, located close to the homes of the persons for whom they are intended should be encouraged.**

*This public open space in Central Square was created by the City following an eminent domain taking of a site which had been used as a gas station.*



## Retention of Open Space

A corollary to the difficulty of expanding the open space inventory, is the need to prevent the sites now in the open space system from falling prey to the demands of other, often compelling uses. Such diversions were not uncommon in the past when schools replaced parks regularly; minor incursions for expanding or improving a roadway are still not uncommon. The issues that will regularly face the city are whether there are any circumstances under which an open space should be lost to another use and, in such circumstances, is the loss of one kind of open space more acceptable than another kind.

"Use it or lose it" might be the motto to sum up the fate of open space facilities in the past and the danger they face in the future. Policy 68 suggests that except in the most unusual circumstances, so unique that they cannot be foreseen in advance, no open space should be lost to other uses. Further, the value of any open space should not be measured, in this regard, by the current intensity of its use for active recreation. Quite aside from the lost potential for future active use, the loss of green spaces which have no active use at present is real. Such spaces provide value simply by diluting the impact of the frenetic, cluttered environment that unavoidably characterizes any urban community like Cambridge.

Policy 69 recognizes that there is much open space in the city, held in private ownership and subject to the vagaries of the owner's future development intent, that is important and valuable to all citizens either directly through active use or indirectly as an amenity in the city's environment, appreciated by all who pass by or through it. The city can be served in very material ways both by securing such facilities from destruction and by making them ever more available to the general public for direct use where that is appropriate.



### POLICY 68

Only under extraordinary circumstances should existing open space facilities be eliminated from the city's inventory for other uses; small, passively or merely visually used facilities, should not be undervalued in this regard merely for lack of intensive or active recreational use.

### POLICY 69

The city should encourage the permanent retention and protection of useful, effective, attractive private open space whether publicly accessible or not. Community use of private recreational and open space facilities in the city should be encouraged at reasonable levels where the private function of those facilities would not be impaired and where the recreational activity provided by the private facility is not well served in available public facilities.

## Maintenance of Open Space

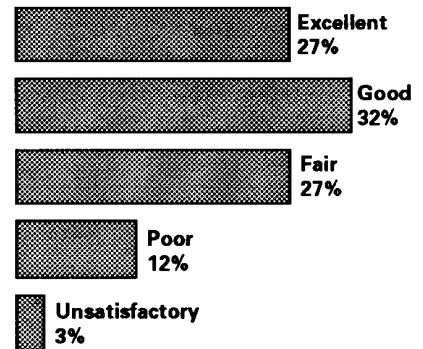
Pressure on the city's open space inventory can arise when available facilities are not useable for their intended purpose because they are in disrepair. This in turn may be because the facility cannot sustain the wear and tear of use to which it is subject. In a world of limited resources, how should the city balance acquisition of open space against maintenance of the existing inventory? How should the city balance lower cost investment in a wide range of facilities to address immediate needs against higher cost investment in quality facilities with greater durability but a limited range of impact?

### **POLICY 70**

**Repair, maintenance and timely upgrading of existing facilities should be the city's highest fiscal priority with regard to open space and recreational facilities. The City should explore, and adopt as appropriate, mechanisms whereby the private sector can reasonably provide, assist in and/or contribute to the maintenance of publicly useable open space and recreational facilities.**

An open space system in a constant state of disrepair serves no one well and colors the perception of the utility and desirability of open space and recreational facilities for those who suffer their neglect. In an environment where choices must be made, where the options for public intervention are severely constrained, Policy 70 recommends that the city err on the side of quality construction and maintenance and timely upgrading of facilities as needs and demand change.

### **Condition of city maintained parks**



*Total not equal to 100 due to rounding*